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# CH'AN NEWSLETTER

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WBAI radio interview between Lex Hixon and Shih-fu  
June 11, 1983

Lex: Shih-fu, you say that "no thoughts" means "no characteristics," but how can the mind perceive the details of the world yet not know the characteristics of these details?

Shih-fu: The idea of "no characteristics," or marklessness, doesn't mean that there are no attributes to things or that nothing is there; it means that the mind doesn't stop on anything or hold on to any particular characteristic of what it perceives. We say that there is no particular mark, but really all marks are there. The mind does not seize on any one thing, it is aware of all things. Therefore the mind is always free and self-sovereign. The comparison between the eyes and a camera is a good example of this. When we perceive something, we use our eyes to look at a particular area or in a particular direction. But when we use our eyes we have a preconceived idea of what we are looking at, what we are looking for. We pick out a limited sphere, and this is what we see. This is called "yu shan," which means that characteristics or marks do exist. However, when a camera is aimed in a particular direction, it takes in the whole scene, because there is no preconceived idea of what to look for. Therefore when the mind perceives "no characteristics," "wu shan," it works in much the same way as a camera. But a person is not really a camera. We have many, many thoughts that continuously invade our minds. We cannot interrupt these thoughts at will, so we must practice. We must practice meditation to stop our thoughts.

Lex: What does Shih-fu mean by thoughts: he obviously saw that I needed a pen a few minutes ago, because he took one out of his pocket and gave it to me. That involved a thought process of some kind, but obviously not the kind that Shih-fu means. So what



does he mean when he says that a perfectly clear mind has no thoughts?

Shih-fu: We must look at the way a thought works. A thought has a specific object, a goal to be accomplished, which is set in the mind to the exclusion of all other things. With "no characteristics" one still has thoughts, but when these thoughts arise, all other things still remain clear.

Lex: So what is important is not separating reality into separate, fixed portions. Is that right?

Shih-fu: Yes, that's right.

Lex: So the problem is freezing, separating, or fixing on to things?

Shih-fu: When the mind stops things or holds on to things, that is "having a mind"; that is being sentient. But a mind that responds to things freely illustrates the idea of "no characteristics." Such a mind perceives a thing without desiring it, feeling attraction for it, or rejecting it. When ordinary people come into contact with an object - they see or hear something - this contact will give rise to feelings of liking or disliking, attraction or rejection. If an ordinary person does not have such feelings of like or dislike when he perceives something, it just may be that he is thinking about something else; that is mind is off somewhere far from the present moment.

Lex: If one had a like or a dislike, the mind could reflect on that just as clearly as any other object in the world? Is this the point?

Shih-fu: No, this is still a case where the mind seizes on characteristics; this is still not the idea of "no characteristics."

Lex: Then let me ask a different question. In Getting the Buddha Mind, Shih-fu says that this pure mind which gives rise to neither feelings of moving or not moving is the mind which can best help sentient beings. But how, in this peaceful state, can you get involved in helping other people?

Shih-fu: The distinction must be made between what is external and what is internal. Outside there is movement; one can help other people. But inside there is no movement, the emotions are at rest. I look for what is most appropriate for a particular situation, and I talk about that. With wisdom one responds to each person differently, according to what that particular person needs. To really help a person is to give him just what is needed. In some cases "doing something to help people" might really be "not doing anything to help people."

Lex: Then without this inner stillness, it's really very difficult to give the appropriate help to someone?



Shih-fu: You don't have to be absolutely unmoving in order to help people. We can use the analogy of waves moving over the water's surface. When the waves are very rough, the surface will be too disturbed to reflect anything. The calmer the water, the more it will be able to reflect. Even if there is a little motion, you can reflect; you can still help people.

Lex: In Buddha Mind, Shih-fu spoke about the moon: "It doesn't say 'I shine,' it just shines." It seems that what the Master is suggesting is the the mind can't have the impression it is still; if the mind is saying "I am still and clear and I am seeing things as they are," then there is a problem.

Shih-fu: Yes, that's right.

Lex: But what do you do when you practice meditation and first begin to experience inner stillness? How do you get rid of the special feelings of being a meditator?

Shih-fu: It's not necessary to do anything. If you exert yourself to get rid of something, to make some purposeful change, you will only make things worse. The best thing to do is to return to your method and keep to it.

Lex: Shih-fu has also said in his book that, "If you suddenly feel, 'Ah, I've discovered limitless expanse, I'm liberated,' in reality you are still in the realm of the limited. Further self-criticism will only keep you in this limited sphere. This is a subtle point. This would seem to be an essential point in Taoist teaching: that any effort or push in any direction is counter-productive. Would Shih-fu say that this is the main point of Taoism.

Shih-fu: I don't know much about Taoism. What I really know is Ch'an Buddhism. But there do seem to be similarities between Taoism and Ch'an, the Taoist idea of "wu wei," for example. "Wu wei" means to be inactive yet accomplish something, it is non-action in activity. In Buddhism, when you begin to practice, you obviously have a goal to attain, but you keep to your method to the exclusion of all other things. Your mind is only on your method. When you reach the next level of practice, or attain a particular result, then there is only that stage, or state, and nothing else. There is no desire to go higher; no desire to go lower. This is similar to "wu wei."

Lex: To move from "I shine" to "just shining" you can't do anything to make that move.

Shih-fu: You would just use your method. Or in Ch'an you might use a "hua-t'ou" or a "kung-an" (koan). These techniques might help you move to a different stage. But what you need is a master who can judge your progress. A person practicing on his own may think that he has had a wonderful experience, but he can not really judge. He needs the objectivity of a teacher, who can tell



him where he is and give him a method so that he can move on.

Lex: Shih-fu writes of this pure mind as, "being boundless, it has no circumference, so there's no way to find an entrance." The phrase, "there's no way to find an entrance," indicates that there is no method.

Shih-fu: Entering is just a goal. It is a door you have to go through. The method is the key, so I say "go and find the door." That's up to you. I can't find the door for you.

Lex: But you write that there's no way to find an entrance.

Shih-fu: As far as I concerned there's no door and no entering. Door and keys are your ideas, your problems.

Lex: So eventually one has to put down the key.

Shih-fu: As long as you have a building, a door, and a key - you still have limitations. These are just used for illustration. Eventually you find that they do not exist.

Lex: In the poem quoted by Master Sheng Yen in his book, the poet tries to express this sudden turning around - finding that there is no building: "In a complete turn about, I grasp the great emptiness/ the 10,000 manifestations arise and disappear without any reason." What does that mean: "without any reason"?

Shih-fu: A person who has this kind of attainment has no past or future. The very ideas of space and time are broken. There are no longer reasons or causes behind these things.

Lex: The 10,000 manifestations are still appearing for him?

Shih-fu: Yes, they are, but he doesn't have any reason to have them present or to not have them present. He doesn't need a big bomb to blow emptiness apart.

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Questions from listeners:

Question: I've meditated for one year, but now I've noticed a lapse into the ways of the past. What's the significance of this?

Shih-fu: This is a problem with our bodies and our lives. We can't be good all of the time. When things are harmonious, you do well in your practice. After a good experience, your body may feel exhausted and you may experience a lapse. You may not ordinarily know whether you are good or bad, but practice may help you know.

Question: I've been unemployed and I've had more time to meditate. Does Shih-fu think that the 9-5 rat race is incompatible with practice?



Shih-fu: You can keep up progress in daily sitting, but you really need an intensive retreat at least once a year. If you make progress during this time, you can maintain it in daily sitting.

Question: Would Shih-fu comment on the effectiveness of kendo and kick boxing to increase concentration and well-being?

Shih-fu: These practices do have benefits, but they are limited. They will bring a simple mind. They can't bring you to no-mind. Only Ch'an practice can bring you to that.

Question: Two years ago I lived with a guru for four months. I felt that I transcended the earth. I had to come back to New York, and I almost feel that I have the feeling again, but not quite. Do I need a teacher all of the time?

Shih-fu: That depends on your tradition. If it's a tradition that emphasizes a transference of power, then you continue to need a teacher. If it's a dhyana tradition, then you rely on your own power. Then you continue on your own.

Question: What about the difference between heavenly blissful experience and earthly experience?

Shih-fu: From my point of view, blissful feelings are illusions.

Question: Then being on the earth must be an illusion, too?

Shih-fu: Yes, but when you're meditating it is different. Even though we say that it's an illusion, we don't say that it is a bad thing: it shows that you've made progress. But you shouldn't get attached to it.

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#### NEWS ITEMS

Shen-yen Shih-fu is going back to Taiwan on January 20, where he will stay for three months. Afterwards he will return to the Ch'an Center.

Beginning Meditation Class: Saturday, Jan. 7, 9am-5pm. \$50.  
Intermediate Meditation Class: Saturday, Jan. 14, 9am-5pm. \$50.  
Both classes will be taught by Shen-yen Shih-fu. There is a student discount price. Those interested please sign up early.

Group meditation: every Tuesday evening from 7:30 to 9:00 at the Ch'an Center. Everyone is welcome.



ACTIVITIES AT THE CH'AN CENTER

SUNDAY--open house: (9-11am) Meditation (11-12am) Chanting  
(12:00) Vegetarian lunch (1pm) Lecture by Master Shen-yen  
(4:30) Evening service

TUESDAY--group meditation from 7:30 to 9:00 pm, free of charge.

THURSDAY--Buddhist philosophy class taught by Master Shen-yen.  
\$10 per class.

SATURDAY--one day group meditation, \$15.

Or: meditation class taught by Master Shen-yen. \$50.

RETREATS--held at the Ch'an Center by Master Shen-yen in  
May, July, November, and December.



The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.

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